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For the Good of Humanity ... Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis

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IGNAZ PHILIPP SEMMELWEIS

THIRD IN our series of Catholic men of science, a word portrait of Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis adds an account of a dedicated doctor whose life became a gallant and bitter fight to rescue mothers and their newborn babies from ever-waiting death. Born July 1, 1818, the fourth son of a German merchant, he became a medical student at Vienna in 1837. After he had taken a philosophical course at Pesth, he continued his medical studies there, obtaining his degree in medicine at Vienna in April, 1844, as obstetrician in August of that year, and as surgeon in November of 1845. In February 1846 he was made assistant at the first obstetrical clinic of Vienna.

Early in his career Semmelweis, a brilliant young interne at the famed Vienna hospital made the shocking discovery that thousands of women were dying at childbirth because of the unhygienic methods of the physicians who attended them. He asserted that this condition among lying-in women was caused by infection from the examining physicians, who had previously made pathological dissections, or who had come into contact with dead bodies without thorough cleansing afterwards. After he had introduced the practice of washing the hands with a solution of chloride of lime before the examination of expectant mothers, the mortality sank from 18 per cent to 2.45 per cent. He also soon formed the opinion that not only infection from septic virus caused puerperal fever but that it also came from other causes of putridity.

When he broached his theory, Semmelweis was at first ridiculed — and then slandered and persecuted. His dislike of public speaking or of writing was probably the reason why his views were misunderstood. Many scholars, among them the doctors of the Academy of Paris and even Rudolph Virchow at Berlin, regarded him unfavourably. The petty persecution and malice of his opponents excited in Semmelweis a sensitiveness that increased from year to year. He was ever filled with hot conflict and fairly burst with the courage of a man with a true cause such as this; the appalling loss of lives, the indifference and neglect around him, were deep anguish to him.

The first account of his discovery was published by Professor Ferdinand Hebra in December, 1847, in the *Journal of the Imperial and Royal Society of Physicians of Vienna* (December, 1847), followed by a supplementary statement from the same physician in April, 1848. The following year, Professor Josef Skota delivered an address on the same subject at the Imperial and Royal Academy of Sciences. Unfortunately, Semmelweis had neglected to correct the

papers of these friends of his, and thus failed to make known their mistakes, so that the inference might be drawn that only infection from septic virus caused puerperal fever.

It was not until May 1850 that he could bring himself to give a lecture on his discovery before the Society of Physicians; a month later he followed with a second one. The medical press noticed these lectures only in a very unsatisfactory manner. He was crushed but in time his zeal returned. In October he became lecturer on obstetrics in Vienna. A few days after the appointment, for reasons unknown, he removed to Pesth where he was made head physician at the hospital of St. Roch and in 1852 was appointed regular professor of theoretical and practical obstetrics.

His theory would not be accepted, though, and with each succeeding "betrayal" of his work, as he felt denial of his discovery to be, mental disturbance became more evident. Heart-broken at the deplorable conditions prevailing and becoming worse, when his instructions were disregarded, he finally succumbed but not before he had made one final attempt to reach the world outside, having failed within. His mind was failing, but one morning before he was taken to the public insane asylum near Vienna, he stole off to a printer. He wrote busily. He commanded his intellect. He handed what he had written to the printer. "Tomorrow!" was the command. When the printer protested that he could not prepare the circulars in a day, Semmelweis paid him substantially to work through the night. Next morning early he crept from the house. He went directly to the printer. The man tiredly handed him a huge pile of circulars. They were printed in bold letters. The words were: **"Young men and women! You are in mortal danger! The peril of childbed fever menaces your life! Beware of doctors, for they will kill you! Remember! When you enter labor unless everything that touches you is washed with soap and water and then chlorine solution, you will die and your child with you! I can no longer appeal to the doctors! I appeal to you! Protect yourself! Your friend, Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis."** He put the bundle under his arm. He went out into the streets of Pesth. He ran to every young man, every young woman. He pressed his handbills on them. He would not be denied. They were gone. He had given away the last handbill. He went home, and then they took him to the asylum. His friends Bathory and Hebra were with him. Reluctantly they left him there. "There is a great man," said Bathory. "There is the greatest man we will ever know. There — in that asylum. And we are not worth it. We are none of us worth it." "No," replied Hebra, "it is probable that we are wholly maimed, blind, imbecilically cruel, ungrateful, that the thoughts by which we live make our very presence here on earth fantastic. And yet — I think we will always have men like him. We don't deserve it but what we are composed of is shining and indomitable. It is not shoddy, and it is wholly pure. It is the cell which is eternal, beyond good and evil, the mortal and immortal symbol of the Almighty. And because of this the covenant will continue and the world and our petty thoughts which people it will continue to receive redeemers. And now this sweet and gentle and bewildered and raving man bears the burden of what we are not. Now he stumbles. Now he carries the cross. But to the end of time Medicine will bear this guilt and the human race will share the burden and the disgrace." From a bad gash in his finger, blood-poisoning developed and a month after he had been admitted, Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis died. Though his mind had failed, in one last lucid moment he whispered, *"I will never stop . . . no . . . never."* The date was August 13, 1865.

Though it was hard for Semmelweis to write, he published his work "Die Aetiologie, der Begriff und die Prophylaxis des Kindbettfiebers" (Vienna), in which he bitterly attacked his supposed and real opponents. He was not rejected by all. The *Etiology* had gone out into the world. Some praised him and hope had been raised for awhile, but when Virchow, the man to whom all the world of medicine looked with reverence, said coldly that childbed fever was caused by erysipelas and inflammation of the lymph glands, it fled. Another claimed, "The strictest cleanliness is of little use in preventing such colossal outbreaks of childbed fever as we experience here [Munich]. The doctrine of Semmelweis is one-sided, narrow, and erroneous."

His doctrine was ignored and misrepresented for years after his death. By 1890, as the older men died and young men replaced them, his theories began to spread, to become universal.

In 1891 a Hungary suddenly conscious of her greatest son took his body to Budapest for burial over the strenuous protests of Austria and Germany, where it now was claimed that the "Pesth Fool" was a German.

In 1906 a statue was unveiled in his honor in the city of his birth.

In the world today puerperal fever has by no means disappeared. But the children and the mothers his doctrine saved, the great men and women who live because he died, are as countless and unimaginable as the waves of the oceans.

Sir William Joppa Sinclair, Professor of Gynaecology and Obstetrics, University of Manchester, has paid this tribute: "It is the doctrine of Semmelweis which lies at the foundation of all our practical work of today. Through all the details of prevention and treatment, the temporary fashions and the changes of nomenclature, the principles of Semmelweis have remained our steadfast guide. The great revolution of modern times in Obstetrics as well as in Surgery is the result of the one idea that, complete and clear, first arose in the mind of Semmelweis, and was embodied in the practice of which he was the pioneer . . . " And Joseph, Lord Lister, Professor of Surgery, Kings College,

London, declared, "Without Semmelweis my achievements would be nothing. To this great son of Hungary Surgery owes most."

For the good of humanity, Semmelweis himself wrote, "When I with my present convictions look back upon the Past, I can only dispel the sadness which falls upon me by gazing into that happy Future when within the lying-in hospitals, and also outside of them, throughout the whole world, childbed fever will be no more . . . But if it is not vouchsafed me to look upon that happy time with my own eyes, from which misfortune may God preserve me, the conviction that such a time must inevitably sooner or later arrive will cheer my dying hour." He did not see results then, but the world knows now.

Books Received . . .

Medical Ethics, Charles J. McFadden, O.S.A. Philadelphia: F. A. Davis Co., 1956. Pp. xix + 491; $4.25.

The main change in this fourth edition of Father McFadden's book is the addition of a chapter entitled "Man's Life — His Duty to Preserve It." In the earlier editions, many references were given at the conclusion of the chapters. For good reasons, explained in the preface, the author has decided to drop these references. Other changes consist of a re-arrangement of some material and the use of new data on various topics. Readers of THE LINACRE QUARTERLY no doubt realize that we now have a revised edition of *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Hospitals.* It would be well to note, therefore, that Father McFadden's book still has the text of the old *Directives.* Those who use his book for classroom purposes should call attention to this and should, if possible, provide their students with the revised edition of the *Directives.*

The Morality of Hysterectomy Operations, Nicholas Lohkamp, O.F.M. Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1956; pp. xi + 206; $2.25 [paper].

This is a doctoral dissertation. After giving the history of the operation and the moral principles that should govern it, Father Lohkamp considers practically all the possible indications for hysterectomy, cites medical authorities concerning its need or value, and then gives a moral appraisal of each case. Unfortunately, the author never gives a summary of these appraisals. A concluding chapter deals with the reasons and remedies for unnecessary hysterectomies. There is a glossary of medical terms, a bibliography, and a good index.